

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the Legislative Session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.



May Francis was born in Mapleton, Minnesota, in 1880. She began her teaching career in a one-room schoolhouse in Bremer County, Iowa. She earned her bachelor's degree at Iowa State Teacher's College in 1910 and became the Bremer County School Superintendent in 1915.

In 1919, Francis led the inspection of more than 1,800 one-room schools of the 10,000 in Iowa at that time. Serving as the appointed Superintendent of Country Schools for two years, Francis drafted important legislation for establishing standard requirements for all country schools.

Francis was elected to the statewide position of Superintendent of Public Instruction just two years after women had won the right to vote.

Francis' term was plagued with controversy. Some of the allegations against her included omitting items from her election expenses affidavit; denying aid to schools for political gain and paying aid to schools that were ineligible; disqualifying teachers based on arbitrary rules never properly passed; and withholding, without authority, teaching certificates from qualified teachers. There were also questions concerning the qualifications of her Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, Thelma Nelson. Although Francis was not impeached, she served only one term as the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

A Representative's Written Account

May Francis was the first woman elected to a statewide position. She was elected as the Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1922.

In [*The History of the Office of Department of Public Instruction in Iowa*](#), written in 1945 by Representative Fred Schwengel, there is one paragraph describing Francis:

In 1922, Mary E. Francis of Bremer County was elected, she being the first lady to have served in that office. During her term an attitude of misunderstanding developed that resulted in the disruption of the program somewhat. However, it may be said that she was conscious of the responsibilities of the office, and in spite of the disagreements and handicaps caused by the misunderstanding, she did contribute to educational development in our State.

House of Representatives Resolution

The Resolution calling for an investigation of Superintendent Francis was offered on April 12, 1924. The Resolution was taken up for consideration on April 15, 1924. Amendments to the Resolution were offered, but none were adopted. The Resolution was adopted by the House of Representatives April 15, 1924, during the Extra Session of the Fortieth General Assembly.

HOUSE RESOLUTION

The following resolution was offered:

Whereas, Serious complaints have been made from many sources in the state that the superintendent of public instruction has made certain rulings in regard to the qualifications of teachers and the accrediting of schools, which are not in accordance with law or precedent, and, if persisted in will result in depriving many faithful and efficient teachers of their positions and the schools of the benefit of their services as well as the benefit of state aid to such schools. That said rulings are also likely to result in a great injustice to many pupils, depriving them of the benefit of being admitted to the higher institutions on proof of graduation in accredited schools; and

Whereas, Certain charges including illegal and arbitrary conduct on the part of the superintendent of public instruction have been made editorially in the press; and

Whereas, In justice to the state superintendent of public instruction, and for the welfare of the educational interests of the state it is most desirable that these matters be investigated and if the said charges are unfounded they should be refuted and if true, steps should be taken at once to provide remedies; therefore,

Be It Resolved by the House of Representatives: That the matter be referred to the judiciary committee for investigation and report of the facts together with its recommendations.

That said committee is authorized to subpoena such witnesses and cause the production of such documentary evidence as in its judgment may be necessary to determine the truth of the matters before it.

RAY YENTER,
JOHN BRADLEY,
E. P. HEALY,
G. E. HELD,
J. P. GALLAGHER.

Judiciary Committee Report

On April 26, 1924, the House of Representatives adopted this resolution offered by the Judiciary Committee:

REPORT OF COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY

Clark of Linn, from the committee on judiciary, submitted the following report:

MR. SPEAKER: Your committee on judiciary, to whom was referred the matter of the investigation of the State Department of Public Instruction, beg leave to submit the following report in the form of a resolution adopted by the committee:

RESOLUTION

Whereas, a resolution was filed by certain members of the House of Representatives, which resolution was afterwards adopted by the House, providing that the matter of certain complaints against the office of the superintendent of public instruction be referred to the Judiciary Committee for investigation and report of the facts, together with its recommendations, and

Whereas, on April 14th, 1924, the superintendent of public instruction filed a written request and demand that investigation should be so conducted, tendering the fullest and most complete cooperation of her department, and

Whereas, on April 17th, 1924, the Judiciary Committee were, by action of the House, directed to conduct such investigation, to subpoena witnesses, employ counsel and stenograph help, and

Whereas, during the week ending April 25th, 1924, the Judiciary Committee has been in constant session each day from the hours of about 8:30 a. m. until about 5:30 p. m., with the exception of the noon adjournment and the time the House has been in session, and

Whereas, many witnesses have been called and their evidence taken down by reporters and afterwards transcribed, such transcript containing more than five hundred typewritten pages in addition to about one hundred exhibits, consisting largely of letters and correspondence, and

Whereas, the Committee was in continuous session in these hearings, as set forth above, until 10:00 p. m. on the evening of April 25th, 1924, and has had no opportunity to deliberate upon the facts disclosed by the evidence, or upon the law governing such facts, or its recommendation in view thereof, and

Whereas, such evidence has been mimeographed so that a full copy thereof is in the hands of each member of the Judiciary Committee, although many members of the committee were unable to sit during the entire sessions and hear the evidence as submitted, and in addition to the above an opinion has been asked from the attorney general of the state on certain legal points involved, which opinion the attorney general has promised to submit to the committee by noon of April 26th, 1924; now, therefore,

Be it resolved that the Judiciary Committee request the House to make an order directing and and requesting the Judiciary Committee to submit its report on the facts and its recommendations as required by the resolution, such report to be submitted the day the General Assembly reconvenes, and that the Judiciary Committee be requested to meet on the preceding day for the purpose of deliberating and agreeing upon its said report.

Clark of Linn moved to amend the resolution by striking the period at the end thereof and adding the following:

"and further that each member of the House be furnished by the chief clerk with a complete transcript of the evidence on or before May 10th."

Amendment adopted.

Clark of Linn moved the adoption of the report of the committee and the resolution submitted in said report.

Motion prevailed.

Clark of Linn moved that 250 copies of the transcript of the investigation be ordered printed.

Motion prevailed.

The [Report](#) of the Committee on the Investigation of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction was submitted on July 22, 1924, on pages 1,718-1,730 of the House Journal. This report included a Minority report. The members felt it was necessary to explain their vote.

EXPLANATION OF VOTE

We wish to explain our vote by saying that we would also vote no on the majority report.

We are for any measure which will correct the objections expressed but we are not for either whitewashing or besmirching the character of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

C. A. KNUTSON
W. J. COLBERT
ALFRED WILLIAMS

We voted no on the minority report for the reason that we are opposed to the adoption of either report.

S. E. FACKLER
T. E. POWERS
GEO. W. EDGE
J. C. McCLUNE
H. N. DONHOWE

Finding that the minority report is not sustained by the evidence in all its particulars, and believing that from the evidence submitted it is apparent that practices have been in vogue not only during the term of the present incumbent, but prior thereto which are not to the best interests of the schools of Iowa, and that the judiciary committee should have pointed out corrective measures and made findings which would improve the school situation instead of the report which has been made we find it necessary to vote against the substitution of the minority report for the majority report in hopes that the said substitution may not be made and thereby give us an opportunity to vote "No" also on the adoption of the majority report.

A. O. HAUGE
FRED C. LOVRIEN

Newspaper Articles

The Daily Times

Davenport, Iowa

April 12, 1924

PROBE PUBLISHED CHARGES AGAINST MISS MAY FRANCIS

[Associated Press Leased Wire]

DES MOINES, Ia., April 12.—Investigation of charges published in a Des Moines newspaper against May Francis, state superintendent of public instruction, was the subject of a conference of half a dozen members of the house of representatives today. The outcome of the conference was not officially announced, but several members whose names were connected with the discussion admitted that a resolution might be filed this afternoon or Monday, asking the house judiciary committee or the committee on departmental affairs to look into the charges.

The charges made against the superintendent of instruction included a statement that evidence which might warrant impeachment could be found by the proper investigating committee, and that the department had been wrongfully administered and used for political purposes.

The Daily Times

Davenport, Iowa

April 15, 1924

**HOUSE JUDICIARY
COMMITTEE WILL
CONDUCT INQUIRY****Investigation of Miss May
Francis' Office Is
Ordered**

STATE CAPITOL, DES MOINES, Ia., April 15.—The conduct in office of Miss May Francis, state superintendent of instruction, will be immediately investigated by the judiciary committee of the house of representatives under a resolution adopted by the house today, 72 to 18. Miss Francis had demanded an investigation following criticism of her department by a Des Moines newspaper.

Members of the house seemed to be agreed that in justice both to the schools of the state and Miss Francis, an investigation should be made, but determination of what committee should conduct the inquiry provoked two hours of debate.

Representative Rewoldt of Bremer county, introduced an amendment to the resolution calling for a committee of nine to be chosen by Speaker Anderson, but was defeated by a 41 to 56 vote.

Representative Rassler and other members of the farm bloc fought hard for the appointive committee, declaring it was a matter of precedent to give matters of such importance to a specially chosen body.

At the end of her term, there were Iowans speaking out in favor of a new candidate. May Francis may be remembered more for the controversy that surrounded her than her role as the first woman elected to a statewide office.

The Daily Times

Davenport, Iowa
May 21, 1926

THE CASE AGAINST MISS FRANCIS

Friends of education throughout the state of Iowa are quite unitedly supporting the candidacy of Miss Agnes Samuelson, for the office of state superintendent of public instruction. The Scott county teachers' association unanimously endorsed her, and a straw vote taken revealed but one vote for Miss May Francis, the present holder of this office.

This is a sweeping indictment of the Iowa school head. Her interference in local school management, the discriminations practiced, and the deliberate attempt to mislead the voters of Iowa have deeply stirred those who by virtue of their positions have been able to observe the excesses committed by the present state superintendent.

We believe the people of Scott county will be more influenced in their preference as to the occupant of this office by the attitude taken by the teachers of this community than by the literature now being circulated, seeking to put Miss Samuelson in a false light.

Enough was brought out in the legislative investigation of the conduct of the office by Miss Francis to establish her unfitness to retain that place. The people of Iowa have always been zealous that the schools be kept out of politics as far as possible. Miss Francis has exercised and exceeded her authority largely to build up a political machine. She has denied state aid, and refused to accredit schools in various counties as punishment for failure to support her in the last campaign. Such practices are odious to all friends of public education.

Even before she took office Miss Francis was guilty of an action which was discreditable. The legislative committee found that her affidavit of election expenses omitted a number of items which should have been included. At the hearing she filed a written motion to strike from the specifications and charges all of that portion dealing with the use of money for primary purposes, on the grounds that the offenses charged occurred prior to her induction into office, and the committee or legislature were without jurisdiction or power in the matter. At best such a position is unbecoming a public official.

The committee found that deception was employed in the appointment of Thelma Nelson, as her deputy, for whereas the law required such officials to have had five years' experience as a teacher or county superintendent, she did not hold a teacher's certificate of any kind during the time she had charge of recitations at irregular periods for a small class at Des Moines university. The inquiry proved that the credentials held by Miss Nelson were wholly false and untrue and that their falsity was known to Miss Francis.

The manner in which payment was made to the school fund of Pottawattamie county to be distributed as state aid among 55 one room schools constituted another scandal.

Evidence submitted to the legislative body showed that under the statute, and rules and regulations of the department none of these schools were entitled to aid at that time and that the ruling of P. E. McLenahan was conclusive on that point.

In defense of her action Miss Francis asserted that it was based on personal inspection. She claimed to have visited 28 schools, scattered over 19 townships in a single day in February, which establishes some record for covering ground in Iowa in midwinter. The fact that some of the schools were not in session did not deter Miss Francis from making a favorable report on them.

She could authorize a \$5,000 expenditure of the people's money with the most cursory inspection, but had time to run around the state at the expense of the taxpayers addressing klan meetings.

A number of other charges brought against this official were conclusively proven in testimony submitted at Des Moines. A further recital would be tedious. Miss Francis' activities are not what the people of Iowa have a right to expect from one entrusted with the responsibilities of this office. The favoritism and prejudices of which she has been guilty destroys all confidence in her.

Merit should be the guide in grading schools. Efficiency may properly be demanded. The office should be above suspicion.

The less interference with the local conduct of school affairs the better it will be for popular education. Miss Francis' administration has been a source of constant irritation to those connected with many of the schools of the state.

Miss Samuelson has a record of service which recommends her for the office. The widespread support which is extended her by those associated with the schools forms her most impressive endorsement.